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ABSTRACT

The author examines the role of values in parent education programs, points out the importance of listening skills for educators, and describes programs which have been successful in teaching parents such skills as reading instruction and behavior management techniques. (CL)

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A Summary of Communicating with Parents of Exceptional Children

by

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There are a number of recent events that should encourage educators to have their skills in communicating with parents. In the May, 1976 issue of the Phi Delta Kappan, it was stated that "Some three-fourths of all U.S. school districts schedule formal conferences at which parents discuss their children's progress with teachers . . . . . There is a trend toward parent conferences which is sufficient that by 1980, 90% of all U.S. districts will be using them." (Page 33). In addition, the language of P.L. 94-142 suggests that every reasonable effort should be made to involve the parents in decisions to place children in special education classes and in decisions regarding the goals and objectives for their children when placed.

Truax and Wargo (1966) pointed out that human encounters can be for better or for worse. If this is true, and there are many reasons to believe that it is, then it is very probable that thousands of children will actually suffer from the movement to more and more parent conferences. Since educators must accept a great deal of the responsibility for the success or failure of the parent/teacher interaction, improved conferencing skills and knowledge should help alleviate the possibility for failure.

Values

As a behavioralist, one often has a tendency to ignore the topic of Values, because of measurement difficulties. Yet the values that one holds

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often plays an important part on what one is willing to do. Consider for a moment the following:

> The "behavioralist" who preaches data collecting but does not take data himself; the administrator who extolls good public relations but who chews out staff members in front of others; the college professor who teaches task analysis but does not use it in his own class; the smoker who does not respond to the data on cigarette smoking; the obese person who does not respond to the studies on overweight and heart conditions; the teacher who knows the effects of daily reporting systems but does not use them.

The list is endless. To say that "the evidence is overwhelming" does not mean that one will see behavioral change.

There are a number of strategies for assisting people in the reflection of their own value systems (Kroth and Simpson, in press; Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum, 1972). Most of the exercises are simple and they do not take long to carry out. Perhaps it is less important to engage in Values Clarification exercises as it is to be aware that parents and teachers enter into conferences with a wide variety of value systems, and that these value systems can have important effects on the outcome of the interaction. A careful analysis of the behavior and values of the children in one's class will often give clues to the values held by the parents. It is also well to remember that while there are differences between the values held by various cultures, there are also important differences within cultures.

Listening

Communication between parents and teachers involves both receiving and

sending information. Problems arise when both paritcipants in a conference are so intent on sending that neither takes the time to receive. Since communication involves the exchange of information, and since the teacher is the professional in the interaction and therefore, responsible for the success of the conference, it behooves the teacher to examine his or her listening posture.

Kroth (1975) identifies four types of listening postures in a listening paradigm. They are, 1) the active listener, 2) the passive listener, 3) the passive nonlistener, and 4) the active nonlistener. While it is doubtful that one maintains any of the four styles all of the time, it is probable that often one of the listening styles is characteristic of an individual. Communication breaks down when both the teacher and the parent are active nonlisteners. This often happens when both of the participants enter the conference with individual agendas. They enter into a "cocktail party" type of conversation. One talks while the other waits patiently for him to finish. Then the other talks. At the end of the conference, neither feels that anything constructive has been accomplished.

Active listening skills can be developed (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1976; Gordon, 1970). It is worthwhile to learn to observe nonverbal communication signals and to practice attending skills. These skills have value for the classroom as well as for parent/teacher conferences.

Teaching Parents

Emotions like fears, anxiety and mistrust are usually associated with the unknown or a lack of knowledge. Terms like behavior modification, testing, IQ, Values Clarification can lead to feelings of apprehension on the part of parents because they have little or no experience with what the terms mean or

how they are derived. If educators want to open lines of communication and elicit parental cooperation, then one way is to teach parents the "mysteries" of educational techniques.

During the 1976-77 school year, a series of workshops were held in the Albuquerque and Gallup Public School Systems to teach parents to test their own children (Kroth and Simpson, in press). Special education teachers, counselors, coordinators, principals and University of New Mexico professors were involved in the project. The children were in classes for learning disabled or behaviorally disordered children and they were tested by both educators and their own parents on the same or comparable instruments. The tests that were used by the teachers were the Wide Range Achievement Tests, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, the Target Behavior (Kroth, 1972), and the Draw a Person. The tests administered by the parents were the Peabody Individual Achievement Test, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (alternate form), the Target Behavior and the Draw a Person. After all of the tests were administered, individual conferences were held to interpret the results.

There were high positive correlations between the parent testing and the teacher testing on all of the instruments ranging from +.56 to +.97. There are no significant differences between the parent testing and the teacher testing except in the area of mathematics. The parent tesing results, using the PIAT, were significantly higher than the teachers testing, who used the WRAT. This year one workshop was held in which the parents were instructed in the use of the WRAT and where the teachers used the PIAT, a reverse of the original study. The math test was higher on the PIAT than on the WRAT which would indicate that the difference was not due to the parent testing, but the instruments that were used.

To date, over forty parents have been through the workshops and all have been enthusiastic about the project. They have indicated that they felt more knowledgeable about tests, test scores, and what they mean. They felt they learned a great deal about their own children, but perhaps, equally important, there was a greater element of trust between the professionals and the parents. A side benefit was that a large number of fathers became involved in the project.

A number of years ago the Educational Modulation Center (EMC) was established in Olathe, Kansas, to investigate procedures for providing services to educationally handicapped children in a rural area (Adamson, 1970). One of the components of the project involved teaching parents and teachers behavioral principles and having them carry out projects with the children in their environments. Dr. Richard McDowell, presently of the University of New Mexico, did much of the developmental work on the parent program and has since developed a film strip/cassette tape program to use in parent education programs (1974).

The results of the program were gratifying. Many of the parents were able to identify target behaviors and modify the behavior successfully. (Parents were encouraged to use consequences from their own environment and in accordance with their own value systems.) They indicated that not only did the targeted behavior change but the children seemed to develop more positive attitudes. There did not seem to be any evidence that knowledge of the principles lead to any abuses of children (Kroth, 1975).

The two projects cited above would seem to indicate that lines of communication can be enhanced by actively involving parents in educational practices with their own children. Many mothers, for instance, have been trained to run the Monterey Reading Program and have proved to be effective

teachers. In keeping with this philosophy, a number of special educators, counselors and principals in Albuquerque, New Mexico, are currently involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating parent education programs. Some of these programs include:

1. Teaching parents to teach their children to read at home.
2. Teaching parents of deaf/blind children to assess language development and to intervene at home.
3. Teaching parents of elementary special class children to initiate interaction with secondary staff (assertive training).
4. Teaching parents effective parenting techniques.
5. Teaching young mothers (15 and 16 years old) bonding, child development and other early mothering skills.
6. Teaching parents of gifted children to test their own children.
7. Teaching parents of young school age children behavior management techniques.
8. Teaching houseparents behavior management techniques.
9. Teaching parents of multiply handicapped children acceptance and expectencies.

There are many things that need to be learned about education for parents of handicapped children. Those who are interested in the area of parent education will be involved in attempting to develop a scope and sequence of activities. There are many "canned" parent education programs that need to be evaluated as to their effect on parents and children. To be effective helpers in the educational process, parents need information and techniques. Confident educators will find that trust, cooperative relationships, and improved communication can be established through the active sharing of educational methodology with parents.

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